

SMOKELESS / SPIT TOBACCO

Even before it was commonly smoked, tobacco was chewed. Until the First World War, it was the preferred way of using tobacco. Smokeless tobacco has experienced a resurgence in popularity in recent years, especially among teenage boys. An estimated 16 million Americans use smokeless tobacco products. A fourth of them are under the age of 21.

▼ Not a harmless alternative

One reason for the growth in the use of smokeless tobacco is the popular misconception that chewing tobacco is safer than smoking it.

On the contrary, smokeless tobacco is higher in nicotine and other harmful ingredients than tobacco found in cigarettes, cigars, or pipes. The moister the tobacco, the higher the nicotine content. A pocket-size package of moist chewing tobacco contains as much nicotine as three packs of cigarettes. Nicotine is the substance that leads a tobacco user to become addicted to the substance.

Furthermore, the nicotine and other ingredients in tobacco are more readily absorbed into the body through the tissues in the mouth and throat than if they were inhaled as smoke.

This is why smokeless tobacco users suffer higher rates of oral and pharyngeal (throat) cancers, gum diseases, and tooth loss than non-users. Two-thirds of the more than 30,000 new cases of oral and pharyngeal cancer cases reported in 1992 were among smokeless tobacco users. Long-term users are 50 times more likely to develop cancers of the cheek or gum.

▼ How it is sold

Often called chewing tobacco, smokeless tobacco is sold in sticks (sometimes called wads), cans, pouches, or small, pocket-size tins. Cured tobacco is cut into small pieces while still moist. To mask the sometimes harsh taste, it is often mixed with mint.

Contrary to its name, chewing tobacco isn't really chewed. A small amount (called a pinch, because a small amount is pinched between finger and thumb) is placed between the cheek and gum. The tobacco causes the user to salivate heavily, necessitating them to spit often. Many users carry a cup with them for this purpose.

(Another form of smokeless tobacco is called snuff. Dried tobacco is ground into a powder, which can be inhaled into the nostrils. This gives the user the same effect as smoking or chewing the tobacco.)

▼ Warning signs

Some common signs that someone is using smokeless tobacco are stained teeth, bad breath, loose or missing teeth, bleeding gums, lesions, and leukoplakia, a precancerous condition in the mouth.

When compared to a national average of 30 % the use of smokeless tobacco is higher among Missouri teenage boys (70 percent say they have tried it) than among their peers nationwide (only 35 percent admit to trying it). Common factors among young smokeless tobacco users include a father who uses it, friends who use it, and an early age at first use.



For more information,
contact the
Missouri Department of
Mental Health,
Division of
Alcohol and Drug Abuse
P.O. Box 687
1706 East Elm
Jefferson City, MO 65102
573-751-4942
or 1-800-364-9687
modmh.state.mo.us



Sources: *Cancer Facts & Figures*, 1993; U.S. Surgeon General's Study, 1992; "Smokeless Tobacco Use Among Missouri Youth," *Missouri Medicine*, June 1990